

# CLAMANTIS: The MALS Journal

---

Volume 1  
Number 5 Fall 2018

Article 12

---

January 2019

## Into the Woods

Johanna Valdez  
[johanna.k.valdez.gr@dartmouth.edu](mailto:johanna.k.valdez.gr@dartmouth.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/clamantis>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Valdez, Johanna (2019) "Into the Woods," *CLAMANTIS: The MALS Journal*: Vol. 1 : No. 5 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/clamantis/vol1/iss5/12>

This Non-Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Student-led Journals and Magazines at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in CLAMANTIS: The MALS Journal by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

## Into the Woods

I riffle through my backpack looking for my car keys. That jingling sound is the sign that the day is over. I pull out the mass, more key chains than keys. Pushing the unlock button, I dread the flood of hot, compressed air that will nearly suffocate me as I slide behind the steering wheel. In a mad scramble, I turn the ignition and roll down all four windows allowing the air to escape and a slightly cool breeze to come in. The Hanover, New Hampshire humidity still hangs in the evening air at eight at night, but there is promise of a cooler night.

With the car running, I scroll through my phone for the accompanying soundtrack that will guide me home. In this moment, on Monday night, after hours in the library and another few in class, these track listings will be the last words I read for the day. Songs and playlists move across the screen, some curated for moments like these—chill mixes and workout lists—but to DJ the eighteen minute drive tonight takes a different skill. The day has left me tired and wishing I was somewhere else. My summer life as a grad student contrasts frequently with my life as a teacher. Years spent sitting silently in the backs of public school classrooms didn't prepare me to be in the front of small boarding school ones. Years later, I found my footing as I perpetually walk high school halls. I feel myself swimming again, now through grad school, and lost. I don't want to sing along and I am not ready yet to allow the music to pull me out of this funk.

Starting at the A's leads me quickly to the C's and a band of angry Irishmen seems right. The Cranberries were the first CD I ever owned, a Christmas present from my father when I was in 5th grade. He bought my sister and me each Sony Walkmans and two discs to start our collections. She got Cyndi Lauper's debut album, and I have always been jealous. I had that rebellious punk spirit, not her. Why didn't it call out to my father that I was the girl who just wanted to have fun, not her? Along with the Cranberries my dad gave me Shania Twain's 1997 classic Come on Over. Even now I don't know why the Canadian country singer's record was my present. I listened to the album on repeat and still know

every word to the obscure deep cuts. My family doesn't listen to country music and we aren't Canadian. I have always guessed the Twain record was on sale.

I ease out of my parking spot in the sea of student cars, and hit the first red light of the night. Before the drive has even begun, the sudden stop asks me if I have chosen the right song, if I need to go to the store, if I have forgotten anything for the night? With the Cranberries on and leftovers in the fridge, I just need to get home.

The light changes and the green leads me down a road overshadowed with trees. Lush and shady, they cover both sides of the road and hang out into the street. Just as the car picks up speed, I see the yellow in front and hit the accelerator to float through the smooth wide left hand turn onto East Wheelock. Students are still running, biking, and walking along the sidewalk, but as the road descends quickly, one last crosswalk stretches across the street and Dartmouth life fades away. I hear the gears of my four-wheel drive shifting beneath my seat and up we go into the trees that line the winding two-lane road. These trees don't just sit in front of someone's yard, they begin the woods with animals and a wildness meant for camping. These trees merge together in my memory with a childhood of camping in the Pacific North West. Out in the desert of southern California, we took camping trips to trees and water. From the redwoods and giants of King's Canyon to the icy sugar pines that form the tree line on Mount Shasta, to the rain covered firs of Washington State, my parents took us to hike winding trails through these mountains and forests. We experienced the organized, marked love of temporary tent camping in this western wilderness. The rustle of these eastern trees carries a different tune.

East Wheelock turns into Trescott and the breeze turns into wind, blowing through the open windows. I put my left arm out the window and wonder if I am ready to sing yet. The day's victories seem too small. Dwarfed and silenced by my own foolish, schoolgirl anxieties, I have little to celebrate or raise my voice in song to. On another night I might bellow in an off key voice along with "Dancing Queen" or maybe mumble through the verses of "You Can Call Me Al," but I still don't feel much like singing. A beat, not lyrics or words or voices, is what I want, and Paul Simon makes me hesitate. When I miss my father, rather than picking up the phone, I find him in the music that filled my childhood. Sunday

mornings he spent playing records and tidying up the house. The smell of lemon wood varnish he polished on our dining room table makes me think of London Calling, Born to Run, and Rubber Soul. My father, never a musician but a lover of music, would challenge my sister and me to pick out different instruments in the music he played. Punk was easy, classic rock too, but some multilayered tracks brought sounds we never heard before far beyond strumming guitars. I don't know if this is where my love of percussion came from that drove me to drum lessons in third grade and kept me playing for the next fifteen years. Bongos and cabasas, claves and chimes. I scroll through my phone to "The Obvious Child" and the drums slowly begin to build. The horns are subtle and Simon's voice is soft, so I crank the dial right and the music echoes into the silent night. As the music decrescendos before the drum solo, I resist turning the volume up as the car winds down the back roads. Into the woods I go.

Anything that isn't a freeway is classified as a "back road" to me. Roads and directions are the beginning of many conversations at home. The 101 is our lifeline on the California coast and the traffic patterns and construction dictate our lives. The most time we spent as a family on the 101 was our daily commute to high school, twenty-five minutes north through Santa Barbara and into Goleta. The bottleneck in Montecito where it changes from three lanes into two was the most dreaded part of the drive. My sister, eager to get her license, usually drove my mother and me to school. To avoid the rush hour trudge we might take the 192 through fire country at the base of the Los Padres forest. Californians are eager to talk about their routes, how they can get anywhere in the state, the quickest way possible. Inland to the 5 or south to the 405, the major arteries make the geography of the state feel less daunting. We might not know each city or town, but roads are a shared currency. Out east, I fight the urge to put a 'the' in front of the 91 or the 84. Taking and talking highways makes me feel a little less lost.

For the first weeks of summer, I used the GPS on my phone find Lakeview Drive. I wrote the directions on a post it note and kept it on my dash in case the backwoods WIFI unexpectedly deserted me. Two notes, one to school and one to home. But as summer wore on, I soon left the notes crumpled in my cup holder and used my phone just for music. Nearly nine weeks of driving is over sixty-three trips under my belt. These still feel like backroads, but I am starting to know them.

As I cruise down Trescott the sun begins to set. Grip the wheel and lean forward. This is not the highway, not just one straight line. There are no lights on the shoulder. Dark is dark out here. I know where I am going, but these roads at night make me nervous. Not only because they are unfamiliar to navigate, they seem closer to a trail than a road. Animals roam, fallen branches aren't cleared for days, and cell service is spotty. The sense of isolation can be stifling. It can also be the quiet one needs after a day filled with noise.

I ease off the gas and keep my speed hovering around the 35 mph speed limit. It isn't yet dark enough to flip on the brights, but my lights are on. I scan the trees, side to side, spending more time with my eyes off the road. There isn't a single deer crossing sign along the whole way home, which always makes me laugh. On one drive to campus around nine in the morning, I saw a doe and her fawn. They were in the left hand lane, motionless, and I couldn't tell if they were coming or going. As I slowed the car, they turned and looked my way. We stared at each other for a moment, the doe's large, round eyes looking back at me. The mother nudged the small one back into the trees and they were off. Every few days I see other deer, but I wonder if I have ever seen that deer again.

Tonight I wonder who else I will meet out on these roads. A frog springs from the right hand shoulder and I am disappointed. A frog in the road is too small for a reaction. I keep my pace. For a moment I try to guess if this means rain. He is probably just headed home.

I check the rearview mirror to see if the frog is still crossing, and see the golden sky span the dark green mountains of Vermont. These six inches of skyline will be in front of me again tomorrow on my drive to class. I can look then. My eyes quickly look back to the road. But the sunset over the Green Mountains pulls my gaze back to the mirror just once more. A stop sign coming up would give me another moment to stare, but the twist in the road takes the mountains with it. My talents of highway driving don't translate to these roads, and I must constantly remind myself to pay attention, stop looking at the mountains or thinking about the trees.

The next eight miles would need two more songs. I take my sunglasses off. That funny twilight time has passed, the sun is behind me, and the trees are growing darker. The car knows its purpose and

climbs the last big hill with little effort. I think about the gas she is guzzling. The power and ease of a four wheel drive was why I bought a Subaru in the first place. Something that will last over 200,000 miles and won't get stuck in the snow. Esther is named after my college thesis advisor, who I always picture having these same qualities of weathered durability. Later I would learn from one of my students, who loved dressing as Queen Esther during Purim, the Biblical implications of this name, and I loved my car even more.

The Etna General Store passes on my right and I wonder if I will ever stop and go in. There are always a few trucks out front and a sign by the road that boasts "chicken and gravy and biscuits" for the low price of \$4.99. Someone is going into this place, even if I am not. Across the street from the rather decrepit store is an immaculate yellow and white trimmed country home. Home and Garden could put it on the cover, there could be a tire swing out back, and maybe a small pond with real fish. The front lawn has one bold yard sign declaring their liberal ideals of inclusivity, science, love, peace, and acceptance. This contrast between store and home catches me. As I pass these buildings, houses, cars and people each day, the repetition gives a false sense of intimacy. I imagine who they might be, but I am not a part of whatever community these people have found out in these trees. The daylight brings small children on walks with parents and dogs along these roads. Ambitious souls run the hills as a workout. They all waved at me as I drove by, and I quickly adopted the practice. They couldn't know me or that I was a student, here in the summer, staying with a family down the road. But they always smiled and waved and so I did, too. I wave to the country store and then to the country home hoping that my friendly acknowledgement might open a small space for me out in these trees.

With one more turn I will continue into the large properties and endless trees. Past the general store, the Etna library, and two more houses, the silence and darkness becomes eerie. A pond on the left bank, seemingly untouched by humans, reminds me that I am just passing through. We all are. There is a sense of trespassing; none of this land is for us. The frog probably has more rights to the pond than I do. Last summer, an egret I named Everett lived in the pond. Standing on his long, long legs, I could spot him in the mornings. I haven't seen him this summer, but it's just June and I'm still looking every day. As I

reminisce on my mornings with Everett, I turn my attention back to the road to see a slow skunk take a few lumbering steps into my lane.

I slow and thank God that I am not the one to hit him tonight. A flash of a poem goes through my head and my memory fumbles to think of the words. Something I read in high school for Ms. Mason's senior literature course. "Skunk Hour" by Robert Lowell. He wrote the poem for Elizabeth Bishop, and the dedication, not the poem, is what I always remember. The first time I read her name began our torrid love affair—an obsession with her poetry, her life in Buenos Aires, her tragic death. Was this Lowell's skunk hour? Was I in it now? Excitement grows as I make a mental note to look up the poem when I get home. I wonder if my students would ever find themselves in a poem we had read together. I hope they would, though know I will likely never know.

The left hand turn on Blueberry Hill had snuck up on me all last summer. This year I had learned how to spot the small street sign hidden behind lush greenery. When the sun was out, it would shine down Laurel Lane to the right and within a beat, Blueberry Hill would arrive on the left. At night, I realized I saw this trick by time, not light. My head turned to Laurel Lane, saw where the beam would be, and found my road as my head swiveled back. This moment was crucial for my navigation. I never just keep driving straight.

Two more turns and four more minutes will get us home. Esther makes one final request for the night, and I am all too happy to oblige. I select the 1989 Indigo Girls classic, "Closer to Fine" and the song's 4:01 run time just gets us there.

I follow Blueberry Hill into my neighborhood. The road is empty now, this late, and I pass each house without a wave. Some have extensive lawns, others hide behind a wall of trees. I have never seen a deer on these roads, maybe too many houses and dogs and cars and kids. My comfort rises as I see the gleam of the house number on our mailbox, and I finally take one hand off the wheel. I pull off the road and onto the shoulder to park. Roll up the windows and grab the day's gear. Easing the door shut, I worry about the slight noise my arrival makes. The four houses on our cul-de-sac are always quiet. People must

live there, I have met some of them, but when the sun sets, the silence and the dark make a friendly suggestion to keep quiet.

As I walk down the dark driveway, I hear the silence peppered with a few bird calls, unknown bugs, but nothing human sounds from the trees. As the branches part, the sky, clear and vast, opens overhead. Stars whose constellations I will never know by name begin to appear in the darkening summer sky. Looking up, I pause to feel just a tiny bit irrelevant. A light ripple of wind sends the leaves shaking and I laugh at the fear I used to have out in these woods. I called it my murder cabin all summer, and I regret the violence and danger I had misunderstood in the quiet. Finding my way to the door, I cherish the darkness of my bedroom window. In that absence of light, I still feel a pull welcoming me home.